

# ***ARTISTIC OUTPUT, ARTS RESEARCH AND THE RATING OF THE THEATRE PRACTITIONER AS RESEARCHER***

## ***Some responses to the NRF rating system after the first three years<sup>1</sup>***

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*“Art begins in a wound, in an imperfection – a wound inherent in the nature of life itself- and is an attempt either to learn to live with the wound or to heal it. It is the pain of the wound which impells the artist to do his work, and it is the universality of woundedness in the human condition which makes the work of art significant as medicine or distraction.” (John Gardner: On Moral Fiction, 1978, p181)*

### **Introduction: The NRF Rating Process**

In 2002 the *National Research Foundation (NRF)*, the state funding agency for research at tertiary institutions in South Africa, daringly extended its successful rating system for the natural sciences (introduced in the mid 1980's), to the social sciences and humanities. The aim is to recognise and advance the quality and amount of research undertaken by Universities and other tertiary institutions in South Africa. The principle is simple, based on a national and international benchmarking system, focussed on the achievements of the individual researcher and a rating of such researchers. The system utilizes a peer review system (and a complex set of review and appeal processes) to categorize researchers into one of seven broad categories (with internal sub-divisions in some cases), based primarily on the output of the previous seven years. The broad categories are briefly as follows. (The more detailed breakdown into sub-categories as well as the specifics of the process of assessment can be found on the *NRF* website at <http://www.nrf.ac.za>):

TABLE 1: NRF RATING CATEGORIES

Category	Definition
A	Researchers who are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field for the high quality and impact of their recent research outputs.
B	Researchers who enjoy considerable international recognition by their peers for the high quality of their recent research outputs
C	Established researchers with a sustained recent record of productivity in the field who are recognised by their peers as having: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Produced a body of quality work, the core of which has coherence and attests to</li></ul>

	ongoing engagement in the field <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrated the ability to conceptualise problems and apply research methods to investigating them</li> </ul>
P	Young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age) who have held a doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application and who, on the basis of exceptional potential demonstrated in their published doctoral work and/or their research outputs in their early post-doctoral years are considered likely to become future leaders in their field.
Y	Young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age) who have held a doctorate or equivalent qualification for less than five years at the time of application and who, are recognised as having the potential to establish themselves as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation, based on their performance and productivity as researchers during their doctoral studies and/or early post-doctoral careers.
Not Rated	Anyone whose achievements are not sufficient at the stage of application to place them in any of the above categories.

Besides the enormous prestige and advantage for individual researchers and institutions of such a rating, the process was initially also directly related to blind funding, in that a rated researcher automatically received funding for future projects, without having to submit applications. With the extension of the programme to all researchers however, this enormous incentive has been tempered radically, since the *NRF* budget would not be able to cover the costs to be entailed. The new system has thus been divorced from funding - and all a rated researcher now gets is the prestige and a shot at five year funding, rather than the usual three years. This is a much debated aspect of the system, and continually being challenged by the various committees and institutions involved.

Nevertheless, the extension to the humanities and social sciences has been generally welcomed, as it seems to indicate some real recognition of the academic and scientific role of these fields. However, the processes undertaken to apply this system to the arts, humanities and social sciences have proven to be hugely controversial - somewhat to the surprise and shock of the management of the *NRF*. (Though its original introduction in the natural sciences and engineering was apparently not smooth going either.) In a sense this dissatisfaction among researchers in the humanities stems from the very reason the application of the rating process to these fields has been delayed for so long, namely the quandary posed by the seemingly subjective and vastly varying *evaluation* and *assessment criteria* that might be required to make it work for subjects such as philosophy, education and the arts.

However, it is not my intention to discuss that here, except in my own little neck of the research woods: the arts, and more specifically, *drama, theatre and performance studies*. For, when they extended the mandate of the *NRF* rating system, they quietly also took an enormously bold initiative by including the arts (creative arts, performing arts and design) in the process. And even more boldly, they actually altered their definition of research to include not only the formal (familiar) research areas of art (music, theatre) history and analysis, but also new forms of output, including the *artistic output* of the staff and students at universities and technikons.

The radically redefined definition of research, formulated under the guidance of their then deputy director Cheryl de la Rey, is quoted below in Table 2. The key additions for the purposes of this article are included in the second bullet of the second paragraph (I have italicised potentially applicable items), notably of course the naming of *performances* as research. However, it also includes an important conditional statement, which I have underlined. We shall return to this later.

TABLE 1: NRF DEFINITION OF RESEARCH

<p>For the purposes of the <i>NRF</i>, research is original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and/or enhance understanding.</p> <p><i>Research specifically includes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the creation and development of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines (e.g. through dictionaries, <i>scholarly editions</i>, <i>catalogues</i> and <i>contributions to major research databases</i>);</li> <li>- the invention or <i>generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts where these manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights</i></li> <li>- the use of existing knowledge to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products, policies or processes.</li> </ul> <p><i>It specifically excludes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- routine testing and analysis of materials, components, instruments and processes, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques.</li> <li>- the development of teaching materials and teaching practices that do not embody substantial original enquiry.</li> </ul>
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**Source:** National Research Foundation website: <http://www.nrf.ac.za>

What makes this definition and approach so significantly groundbreaking is the fact that the battle for the recognition of creative outputs as research outputs (or the equivalent thereof) has been raging for many years in numerous institutions and forums, as will be pointed out below. And then, quietly, almost without fuss, this strategically placed institution opened the way for recognising the work of the hundreds of creative individuals who research and expand their fields, and go on to teach, and disseminate their new insights in a variety of (non-conventional) ways.

But, unfortunately - though most predictably I suppose, given the naturally interpretative and even oppositional function of the arts in society - the application of this principle to the various arts forms has not been easy. Indeed, I have been a member of the NRF appointed *Assessment Panel for the Performing and Creative Arts, and Design* from the beginning (and since 2003 as Convenor) and can vouch that it has been a laborious process, quite fraught with controversy and difficulty. Also of concern has been the apathy among researchers and teachers in the field.

It is against the background of this exciting but controversial development that this article then sets out to consider some of the issues involved and the problems encountered by the *Assessment Panel for the Performing and Creative Arts, and Design* in applying the principles set out in the regulations and other documents.

I want to emphasise that my aim is to consider some of the interesting issues raised by the process in our ongoing debate on the nature of research in the arts, *not* to act as an

apologist for the shortcomings of the system or a publicist for the system itself. However, it is important to note that the NRF process is simply one small step towards solving a much larger problem. Most of the debate surrounding the issue of *practice as research* is actually focussed on another South African process, one that affects many more individuals and institutions, namely the recognition and rewarding of *research outputs* by the state, through the SAPSE exercise devised by its Department of National Education. This rather uniquely South African initiative pays a subsidy to the various institutions on the basis per output. In many institutions (part of) that money is passed on to the particular department, or even to the individual researcher in question. This system has been in place for many years and can be, for the prolific researcher, a source of considerable additional research funds. It has also revitalised a number of local journals, by ensuring them a steady flow of submissions. However, despite years of petitioning in a variety of forums, this system has remained closed to any attempt to get it to recognise creative outputs as the equivalent of formal articles or books - and there have been strong and compelling arguments for the exclusion<sup>2</sup>. I shall not go into the merits or demerits of that issue, but focus here on the immediate problems I found confronting us in the NRF Panel. Nevertheless I do think that the rating process has actually opened avenues of exploration for winning some support on the wider issue as well.

To contextualise matters I would like to start with a brief discussion of the developing debate, and my own position on the matter, as someone who has come through the *Human Sciences Research Council* process, both as social researcher and archivist in the arts.

### **Artists, artistic output and arts research: the ongoing debate**

One of the most tantalizing and annoying aspects of the current academic situation – in South Africa and elsewhere - is the enormous emphasis placed on the *quantity* (not *quality*!) of research outputs as a measure of excellence and a funding criterion, and consequently the way *creativity* is viewed and treated by academic planners and educational authorities. Because the tertiary education system is currently predicated on three fundamental activities (teaching, research and outreach), *creativity* and more specifically *creative output* (art products and performances) are really an embarrassment in most cases, for no-one quite seems to know where such things fit, what they are, how to measure or evaluate them, how to promote or reward them. A liability compounded by the expense of such departments as measured by infrastructural costs and student lecturer ratios - the basic measures employed by the state's subsidy formula. (This will hopefully be less of a problem in future with the new more liberal funding formula introduced in 2004, one which finally seems to recognise the expenses as fundamental to the nature of the disciplines<sup>3</sup>.)

The counter argument here would naturally be to point to the many departments for the arts situated in the various Universities and Technikons as proof of the recognition of the role of the arts in education. (Virtually each of the larger universities has a music, art and drama department, all have literature departments). But the crux of the matter lies in the

outputs expected of those departments and their staff, particularly in the late twentieth century. They are expected to produce not works of art, but (quantifiable, tangible) works of research. Only such work is considered for financial support (formerly and notoriously by the *HSRC* and its funding arm, the *CSD*, and now by the big-brother conglomerate, the *NRF*.) This attitude is often widely displayed by the various *research committees* of the institutions themselves as well. The same is true for reward systems (in terms of state reward systems for research, such as the *SAPSE* system of allocations for publications) and often even for promotion at the various institutions. (Though it does seem that some institutions have recently begun shifting their position on this, to accommodate a more flexible approach to the latter issue. Some indeed have gone remarkably far to accommodate the arts in new research, funding and human resources policies.).

Now the terrible irony of this situation is that while the creative output of individual staff members or departments is not seen to be of academic (or financial) value to tertiary institutions, it is nevertheless often seen as highly prestigious and is actively used as publicity material to promote the image of the University or Technikon. (See for instance the collections of sculptures and paintings on the walls of the offices and the museums, public performances by the musicians, dancers and actors, the publicity given awards made to the writers, etc., etc.) Indeed creative excellence may even be viewed as an exceedingly important advantage to such institutions, of course, for it tends to draw sponsors, students, publicity, and so on. However, such creative work is not accepted as an academic activity in its own right nor actively promoted and supported as a fourth "fundamental activity" of these institutions, but is seemingly expected to be a *by-product* of the three "core" activities – at least not as far as the state is concerned.

When we argue for the acceptance of our creative work as research outputs (and we have been doing so for at least the past two decades in South Africa) we are clearly faced with a complicating factor in the fragmented way our disciplines have been structured over the years. The point is that fields we know as "drama" (or "music" or "creative/fine arts") normally consist of two distinct sub-fields, the one theory and history oriented ('the study of the art form') and the other the "training in the practice of the art form". (There are more fragments, but they are not of concern here now.) This dichotomy has been with us for centuries and has bedevilled our engagement with the arts in a profound way. However, of more direct concern in my argument is the fact that there are a large number of teachers and researchers in the arts who are actually engaged in "legitimate" and quantifiable forms of research, leading to the production of research articles, books and copyrighted material, *and they often do this in addition to more esoteric "artistic work"*. It is these people, who produce the many books and articles *about* theatre, who - by their very existence - complicate matters for those who do not do this, since the authorities can then point to their example and say "if they can do it, why can't everyone?"

The (somewhat futile) counter argument is usually that creative work takes up time, energy and utilizes a different set of faculties, that people are either artists or they are researchers. By implication they are saying researchers are not/cannot be "artists". I don't believe this. I think *both* arguments are far too simplistic to hold. The evidence is often

against it anyway - those who have done so, have often succeeded spectacularly in both fields. The field of theatre and performance studies alone has brought us such influential figures as Herbert Dhlomo, Guy Butler, N.P. van Wyk Louw, T.T. Cloete, André P. Brink, Zakes Mda, Stephen Gray, Ian Steadman, Dennis Schauffer, Kole Omotoso, Lynn Dalrymple, Mervyn Mc Murtry, Yvonne Banning, Veronica Baxter, Gay Morris, Mark Fleishman and many more. The younger generation seem to me to be equally versatile and endowed with boundless energy and creativity.

Which does not mean that we do not also have the more focussed, single-minded researcher or creative artist. Not everyone is interested in or skilled at doing both. And much of our ensuing discussion will be focussed on them: the ones whose passion is the creative process. (The one with the passion for research, such as F.C.L. Bosman, Ludwig Binge, Donald Inskip, Tim Couzins, Martin Orkin, Yvette Hutchison - and indeed, myself, are of course catered for quite comfortably in the state's various systems.)

Occasionally a rather persuasive, even compelling, case for the recognition of creative work by the research fraternity is made by artist-academics such as novelist Marlene van Niekerk and artist Greg Kerr. They have each expressed the belief that the creative output should receive recognition for what *it is*, namely a *primary* activity, i.e. the focus of research *in itself*. Thus, a play, a performance, a composition, an opera, a dance, a novel, a poem, a painting, a sculpture, etc. would become the *object of study* of students, critics and historians, on which they then publish. (By definition then it should be viewed not as an output itself, but as the source of outputs.) They feel that this constitutes a stronger and more pure argument for the importance of the artists within the academic world. Unfortunately - rather alarming so - this obviously valid point may be turned against us, and be used as the strongest argument for *ignoring* artistic output as a research output. The fact is, it directly contradicts the other, more familiar, argument, namely that the *process of making the work of art itself is a process of research*. It is a point eloquently argued by novelist and critic John Gardner in his inspirational *On Moral Fiction* (1968) and one repeated by Athol Fugard in a recent lecture in Stellenbosch (April, 2004). We return to this argument below.

It is fundamentally a stalemate situation, unhappily preventing the growth of a more vibrant and expanded research culture in the arts in South Africa. There are many issues here of course, but the real problem for me is the extent to which this negative attitude towards the artist and his/her output has struck viciously inward over the years, affecting the each creative individual, demoralizing artists and arts departments at all these institutions, and causing them to feel inferior to "scientists", and marginalized within the academic community. It is an attitude one senses whenever artists working in tertiary institutions get together - there is a sense of frustration, a constant awareness of "them", the faceless one's out there in the administration - and it blocks true creativity. And this influence continues its evil work today, as the bean-counters of the research-is-money persuasion get to work on our minds, souls and institutions under the spate of "new" educational policies and processes of restructuring. (The effect of this on our particular institutions is deadening - I fear the bureaucratization of universities and technikons is killing off creative souls at a rate that our country can hardly afford...)

Bearing the foregoing outline in mind, it seems to me that it is one thing to be proud of a creative artist's output, to utilize it to demonstrate the quality and cultural awareness of a particular institution. Indeed over the years some institutions have proudly displayed their "cultural colours" - and why not, if they happen to employ major artists, writers, musicians and the like. It is quite another matter however, to work out how such output may be rewarded in terms of a system which thinks only in terms of *teaching*, *research* and - more recently - *outreach* (or *community involvement*), with the major stress increasingly on *research* (and research in the narrowest sense, borrowed from the natural and social sciences), with a corresponding diminution of the importance of teaching as a source of income. (The ramifications of such a cynical and mercenary view of the function of research at tertiary institutions boggle the mind and would - and should - constitute a whole new article and debate.)

However, the results of this kind of thinking for anyone in the arts may be illustrated with a simple example (inspired by the highly dramatised arguments frequently put forward by Greg Kerr when head of the Fine Arts Department at the University of Stellenbosch):

A tertiary institution appoints a famous painter (or actor, novelist or musician) as lecturer on the grounds of his or her stature as artist (i.e. as creative person) to train other young artists. (This of course adds value in the form of expertise and prestige and thus draws both funds and students to such a department and the institution.) But once the person is appointed, he or she is not expected to continue enhancing the established reputation by painting (or acting, writing, or making music) – but to teach (which is fine, which is what he or she is primarily there to do), to do research and (if there is time) and to do outreach. And only that – for creative work is not actively discouraged in most cases, since (as shown above) neither the state nor the tertiary institutions make provision for a recognition or reward system for such products and processes.

The problem illustrated by this example is far from unique to South Africa of course (though each university or technikon most probably can offer an example or two). Indeed the core issues have become point of spirited debate internationally, with a number of initiatives having surfaced in other countries over the past few years. Besides specialised conferences devoted to the issue over the years, most international conferences now have an ongoing debate about these and related issues. For example the *Performance Studies International*\*\* (*PSI*) has much of its focus on the interface between practice and research, while the *International Federation for Theatre Research* (*IFTR*) has recently established a working group on *Practice as Research* at the instigation of Jaqueline Martin. In a related thrust the notion of *Practice as Research in Performance* (*PARIP*) is being studied internationally by a Bristol-based *PARIP Project*, and demonstrated in a wave of new research and publication. (The names of such respected academics as Philip Auslander, Herbert Blau, Elin Diamond, Bas Kershaw, Jaqueline Martin, Willmar Sauter, Maria Shevtsova, and others appear in the bibliography issued by this group on their website - <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/bib.htm>. Interestingly though, it contains very few practitioners!)



If nothing else, all of this activity demonstrates a universal sense of unease at the apparent de-culturalization of society, in favour of a technology-driven economy and (higher) education system. A feeling that the arts, literature, cultural awareness – and indeed society itself – are clearly and unrepentantly being marginalized and sacrificed at the altar of the great god pragmatism. And its high priests are the bean counters of the state and the various institutions: the collectors, systematisers and evaluators of *research outputs*, who usually trade in the articles and books they have won for cash. In a highly competitive, commercialized and dollar/euro/pound-driven new education, this is the only game in town.

In South Africa such a sense of unease and frustration has also been growing over many years, particularly with the advent of the new, highly pragmatic outcomes based (or rather *income* based), approach to tertiary education by the ANC-led government, an approach which has begun to infect not only our feelings about ourselves as researchers, but also as teachers and human beings. But among the most embattled have inevitably been the artist-teacher, who finds him-/herself caught between a number of stools – being dependent on one ministry as teacher, another as artist, and looking to a range of state departments and organisations for support (e.g. *NRF, NAC, Lotto*, etc.) And each has its own set of (conflicting) demands. A key meeting in this regard was one called *Arts Research: A National Seminar* convened by the Technikon Pretoria and the HSRC at the *CSIR Convention Centre* in Pretoria on Monday 1 March 1999. It was at this meeting that some colleagues and I first broached the some of the ideas discussed below. This has since been followed by a number of other meetings throughout the country. Some devoted to single disciplines (Fine Arts for example, met in Johannesburg at the Technikon Witwatersrand on 29 August 2003) and some regional. (For example, a weekend meeting of representatives of all the art forms from the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch took place at the Mont Fleur Conference Centre outside Stellenbosch in September 2003.) Of course numerous meetings and debates have been organised within the many affected institutions over the past years as well, with varying success and/or impact. The most recent national meeting focussed on drama, theatre and performance was the conference for which this paper was originally prepared: *Dramatic Learning Spaces - A South African Research Conference* (University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 23-25 April 2004). And the extent of the problem and the depth of feeling attached to it, is perhaps best demonstrated by considering that virtually 50% of the many sessions and papers at the conference were actually focussed on the notion of performance as research (output). The conference also had a working group on *Practice as Research*, which led to the founding to an ongoing national working group, to continue the discussions on a website that is to be created for the purpose and to be based at the University of Cape Town, on the website of the Drama Department.

## **Key issues raised by the rating process**

In the light of the foregoing contextualization, I would like to consider a few issues which seem to bedevil the whole process. In this regard I would specifically like to consider some matters that have become prominent stumbling blocks in the work of the

*Assessment Panel for the Performing and Creative Arts, and Design*, of which I was a member and later convenor from 2002 to 2004. The aim here is simply to raise the particular problems we have faced in this time, for discussion in future forums.

***The notion of "research" in the arts:***

We have seen the NRF definition, quoted above. It implies a process whereby we enlarge our knowledge and understanding of the world, and enhance our ability to control, alter and improve on it. In this definition it seeks to include the methods and processes employed by creative and performing artists as well as designers.

The problem for the arts is that they are a complex mix of multiple processes and products (even in some cases of multiple participants), which imply a whole range of theories and methodologies. In this respect the discipline of theatre studies offers some of the more problematic but interesting examples. To illustrate, let us consider a few approaches one may have to the notion of "theatre research".

*(a) Arts research as "the study **OF** the arts":*

This first approach sees theatre (the play, the production, and its components) as the *object of study*. This is the conventional approach of disciplines such as literary, dramatological, musicological and art-historical studies. (Many names occur here: In theatre alone - the ugly "Theatre Science", "Teaterwetenskap" "Theaterwissenschaft", "Theatre Studies", "Drama Studies", "Dramakunde", "Performance Studies", etc, etc. They all appear to refer to some specific focus, but in the end it is all about studying *the phenomenon of making theatre*, i.e the analysis of a *process*.) There is a long and venerable tradition of this kind of study, dating from the writings of Aristotle and leading to the numerous theatre researchers and critics publishing in the twentieth century. As pointed out earlier, this is supported and maintained by the principles followed by such influential associations as the *American Society for Theatre Research*, the *International Federation for Theatre Research*, the *International Society for Theatre Critics*, and the like. All devote themselves not to making theatre as a research process, but studying the processes and products of the artists who do. And the products of their research is presented at conferences, published in journal, books and electronic format, and studied at universities as text books for the next generation of theatres. Similarly most of the most prominent journals in the field tend to print conventional research of this nature, employing the same narrowly prescribed formulae for how this research and its findings are to be presented, disseminated and evaluated.

Clearly there are no reward and funding problems here, since this process is precisely the same one in place for all other fields of research. It has therefore to date been the only one taken seriously by the *SAPSE* system.

*(b) Arts research as "a study undertaken **THROUGH/BY MEANS OF** the arts".*

This second position sees the processes of making art as a process of research, and the resulting work of art as a "research output" and is obviously the most crucial category for the current debate in South Africa - and indeed internationally. (It is for example at the heart of the PARIP project at the University of Leeds and the Working Group on Theatre as Research of the IFTR.)

While the current urgency has basically been brought about by two factors, namely the growth in University based drama training programmes and the increasing pressure on publication in all such institutions, numerous writers and artists have obviously made the same claim for their work over the years. For example American novelist, teacher and critic John Gardner, writing about what he calls "moral fiction" (i.e. serious writing), says:

*"When fiction becomes thought- a kind of thought less restricted than logic or mere common sense (but also impossible to verify)- the writer makes discoveries which, in the act of discovering them in his fiction, **he communicates to his readers**". ..... "What the writer understands, though the student or critic may not, is that the writer discovers, works out, and tests his ideas in the process of writing. Thus, at its best fiction is... a way of thinking, a philosophical method" (Gardner, 1978, p 107-109)*

And, of course, these persuasive words about the novel could hold equally well for any form of "moral" art, in his terms.

It is a thought reiterated by Athol Fugard recently in an address to students in Stellenbosch, when he discussed his own working methods, stressing the combination of research, analysis and intuition which goes into the making of any play.

The fundamental argument here is that the work of art constitutes a unique form of "soft science" (like literary study, philosophy, aspects of psychology, sociology, and the like), as useful and admirable as any other, being at the same time both process and product, and in some cases also the discussion of that product. (See further below) However, it is also this category that offers the most problems to the rating panel, particularly in terms of the nature of the outputs produced.

*(c) Arts research as "the development of NEW TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES for making art":*

This is the one most people would most likely like to argue for more than any other. Namely, that the process of making a play or writing and performing a piece of music, developing a new way of seeing in art, etc is a form of "*developmental research*". While this is a popular and greatly supported approach in the natural sciences, engineering and so on, it is a little more problematic in the arts. The problem here is that it is usually another person (a critic or scholar) who has to see, recognize, evaluate and even interpret the new development – and it would be he or she who gets the academic credit for their report, rather than the creator of the artefact itself.

(d) *Arts research as “the development of NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND INSTRUMENTS for use by artists”*

Related to (c) above, this is another conventionally acceptable form of research. The process(es) whereby new technologies and instruments for producing art and artefacts (e.g. new paints, new lighting systems, new musical instruments, etc.) are developed, and the process of registering patents for it, is a standard process in the natural sciences and engineering of course. Clearly this could also be interpreted as “arts research”, though it is not at issue here, since it would fit comfortably in other categories of “conventional” research.

### ***Research outputs:***

Complex as the the nature of research is, the question of what constitutes a process of research in the arts, and in theatre in particular is actually less fraught with problems than the question of what constitutes an acceptable *outcome* or *output*. For this is what everyone wants to assess, also the peer reviewers, assessment panels, committees, etc of the *NRF* rating process. The fact is that while most natural scientists struggle to think of an artist as someone exploring an issue in the process of creating a work of art (see the quote from John Gardner above), they can actually live with it - but their real problem is accepting the final work in itself as the report or output.

It is important to remember that in the academic-educational context of the social sciences and humanities the prime means of *reportage* on research and research results is the *written word*, and furthermore, the written word in a form that has gone through peer-review processes of some kind<sup>4</sup>. But works in the arts are not normally in that form, and so they are normally rejected by the rest of the research fraternity. (See the next point.)

They find themselves much happier supporting someone like Marlene van Niekerk (2004) in her argument that the work of art is not an outcome itself, but is the *object of study*. (A fatal argument of course if the plan is to access funding earmarked for the promotion of research. The *NRF*, the *Department of Education* or any *University Research Committee* would no doubt argue that they cannot fund the making of artefacts to be studied - they can only fund the process of studying the artefacts.)

The *NRF* definition (quoted and discussed above) outlines a broad , generic notion of what constitutes “outputs” in the arts, to which the *Assessment Panel for the Performing and Creative Arts, and Design* was asked to append a working document (*Key Research Areas*), containing a section headed *Types of Research Outputs* and outlining examples of the kinds of outputs to acceptable to the panel.

For theatre, the Panel's working document currently reads:

<i>In Drama and Theatre: Scripts or other texts for, performances in, the direction and design (lighting, sound, sets, costumes, properties, etc.) for live presentations</i>
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as well as for films, videos and other types of media presentation. This applies to any other non-textual public output (e.g. puppetry, animated films, etc.), provided they can be shown to have entered the public domain and manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights.

Crucial, for our purposes, are the lines I have emphasised: "provided they can be shown to have entered the public domain and manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights." How does one show this, is the critical question.

### ***Rating the performer's "research output"***

The points made about the public domain and the need to embody new or substantially developed insights are re-emphasised throughout the working documents tabled by the *NRF* at its recent meeting for the convenors of the various panels. One reason for this was that the *Panel for the Performing and Creative Arts, and Design* has gradually recognized an urgent need for clearer criteria to distinguish between the performance (or aspect of a performance) which entails a specific research aim and thus offers a distinguishable *research outcome*, and the performance (or aspect of a performance) which has no such aims. (Similar distinctions may be made in conventional research of course, between writers who undertake new research, and those who simply report existing knowledge - hence the refusal to accept most teaching handbooks as research outcomes.)

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This point is particularly apposite when one has to consider an application from a performer or technician (in music or theatre, even performance art). Nowhere is the immense complexity of the theatre as an art form better illustrated than in these cases, for the assessment panel often has enormous difficulties in processing applications by individuals whose sole academic activity revolves around performing and teaching, and whose role is subservient to the performance as a whole. There are a variety of reasons for this (including our notions of what precisely constitutes the "output" in theatre, and issues discussed in other items, such as replicability of research and the peer review system), but basically it has to do with the way research and the research output is defined.

To be more specific, let us consider two (hypothetical) submissions.

(1) A play is written by a playwright exploring the impact of our cultural/political memory on our personal relations in this country and the play has been publically performed and/or published. In this case the researcher (the playwright) uses processes of hypothesis to come to some kind of insight, which is reported in the play. (Similarly, a director may take an existing play - eg *Antigone* - and explore its relevance in a context in a production performed for the public - think of Jean Anouilh's classic revision of the play for performance in Nazi occupied France.) It is clearly a simple case which can be easily fitted into the new, expanded definition of research. In this case the play or production constitutes a research output.

(2) A performer plays the leading role in such a play. In this case it becomes much more difficult to see the actual research undertaken by the *performer*, since the performer is basically interpreting and filling out a character set by the author and/or director. The counter argument may be that research is required to "find" the character - but the outcome of that process is simply a cog in a much larger wheel, i.e. the performance as a whole. What precisely is the research outcome here? (This is even more problematic when we look at musicians of course, or a costume designer, lighting technician or stage manager.) A key factor to remember here is that teaching, preaching or writing a handbook - which may also involve some degree of research in order to prepare and present the item in question - are *not* normally accepted as outputs, are even explicitly excluded in some cases. The key aim and function of the teaching process, the sermon, or the handbook is generally not to demonstrate the (new) results of a research project, but to teach and inform utilizing and interpreting existing material. Similarly the performer (or any of the others) could be seen as an instrument utilized to interpret and present the work rather than an independent researcher of the kind the rating system is considering.

Naturally the latter arguments change vastly once we move to improvisational and group work. Now the ensemble may be the creator, and the production is in a sense the product of the group, not an individual. So everyone involved can in effect lay claim to the play as their outcome. A valid argument, if the aims, premises etc can be proven. (An excellent example here would be *The Island*, another reworking of the Antigone myth, this time set in South Africa and devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona.)

Which brings us to another crucial issue: The question of *replicability*.

### ***Research methodology and the replicability of research***

It is usually accepted as a fundamental premise (though not explicitly stated here) that any results from such research will be communicated to other researchers and posterity in general, enabling them to learn from, utilize and replicate such research. The universally accepted notion of replicability (i.e. the ability to repeat and thus test the results of a process of research) weighs heavily in the evaluation of any research output. Surely this is not really an issue for much of our work in theatre practice? We look at other people's work not to repeat it, but to do something they have NOT done. Can this constitute research? I think so, since the point of replicability is that it *can* be repeated, but that does not necessarily mean it *has to be* or that repeating it makes it significant or new research. New research needs to go further, come to other conclusions, apply findings elsewhere, etc. So too in theatre - it is possible to do what someone else has done, but why bother, the point is to go further, be original.

Unfortunately for us however, the focus of most assessment processes of research is not on *process* but on the final *product* and the notion of replicability also suggests that any output must contain *within itself*, a description of the aims, the methods, the process(es) utilized, *as well as* the result(s). This may be seen when we consider the conventional output, the accredited and peer-reviewed article. This usually contains an outline of the

research problem, the theoretical underpinnings, the methodologies and processes used, the results and the interpretation. It thus constitutes a totally replicable research project. Is this true of a performance?

Millie Taylor (2002) teases out some of the complexities of this question to make the point that if we can argue convincingly that "the performance event is the sum of the research and is witnessed by an audience [i.e. is taken into the public domain], then it might be both the experiment and dissemination" (key concepts in a definition of research). "However", she goes on, "if the research questions are defined and the performance experiment devised, then the the performance outcome constitutes only a small part of the research. If this is the case then the attendance of the experiment or performance cannot be sufficient to understand the research questions and processes." If not, and her example seems to suggest that it cannot be, since few performances are both process and output without any prior theorizing, development processes, and the like, then she suggests that " (a) new form of presentation/performance/documentation may be required to enable understanding of other stages of the investigation and the conclusions." (Taylor, 2003, p5).

Interestingly, the *NRF* definition seems to fa vour this idea and actually opens up possibilities for doing this when they accept a catalogue as a research output. Surely one can argue for the inclusion of substantial illustrated programme notes, published in the same format as a catalogue of an exhibition, under this category. But - crucially - this would entail *written documentation and argument*, which always seems to be the stumbling block with some artists, notably those who see themselves as non-verbal artists. This argument ended up being the key point of argument at every conference on the matter I have ever attended - including international contexts.

And certainly, it is perhaps the key issue in each evaluation done by the *Assessment Panel for the Performing and Creative arts, and Design*.so far. The point is: in order to judge whether a particular project qualifies as a research project, it is necessary for the peer reviewer (the key figure in the rating process) to be able to judge the ouput/results against the aims, intentions and methodology set by the researcher/artist. Without this, only the nature of the result can be judged, the rest merely intuited.

The most frequently suggested solution for this problem is that the researcher/artist who wishes to participate in the rating process should be prepared to provide the peeer review panel with a written outline of the process. (Perhaps as a programme note or a catalogue.)

To a conventional researcher usually this sounds like a simple, minimum, requirement with which to comply in order to reap the benefits of a rating or a grant. Not so: at virtually every forum where I have made this suggestion (including meetings of the Assessment Panel itself!) I have been met with angry opposition. It is seen as a discriminatory imposition which denies the fundamental nature of the communcation processes in the arts. To put their arguments simply: artists communicate their visions, their findings, etc by means of visual images, not words. To translate those images into words is to reduce them, to deny their inherent truth. In short, the work must speak for

itself, communicating both its aims, its processes and its results in one presentation/performance/etc.

*Peer review and the problem of referees.*

*Numbers versus quality and impact*

*Facilitation of research and developing infrastructures*

*International exposure and marketing of the research.*

## Notes

- 1 This article is a substantial reworking and expansion of the paper presented at *Dramatic Learning Spaces: A South African Research Conference* in Pietermaritzburg on 24 April, 2004. My thanks to the participants for their invaluable comments and the feedback and further discussions provided at the conference.
- 2 One strongly argued point has been that the whole SAPSE system was devised to encourage formal research by offering some monetary incentives and rewards for it, while the creative work has its own rewards system in place, since works of art are (usually) financial ventures and works are sold, or income is derived from them. A secondary argument points to the fact that, unlike formal researchers, artists have a number of other funding and rewards systems available, including the *National Arts Council* and the various arts awards.
- 3 A four-tier funding formula, in which - finally - the government recognizes that arts departments are expensive and they are therefore grouped with the most expensive (e.g medical studies and agriculture), as opposed to less expensive subjects, such as languages and most of the social sciences.
- 4 This is a critical issue, which needs to be considered and perhaps be questioned seriously. Why does an output *have* to be in written form, one may ask? Surely it is not always so in the natural sciences, engineering etc? They can produce a patent, proof that they have developed some new technology, or a formula, to indicate their findings. Why can one not present a video, a film, a play as a final



result? Surely the peer review process can be applied to anything – products and processes alike. It is simply a matter of planning and setting criteria that would be generally acceptable.

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